

NOT EVEN PAST



Selling ourselves short? PhDs Inside the Academy and Outside of the Professoriate

Tweet

By Lauren Apter Bairnsfather

In 2009, as I planned to return to the University of Texas at Austin in a staff position, I wrote: “It is hard not to feel that I have sold myself short by deciding not to be an academic. And even worse that I have to face this fact every day working in the administration of the university that most shaped me.”

It is remarkable how my perspective has changed over four years and how my satisfaction in my work exceeds anything I might have hoped for. In a recently published article in *Perspectives*, I was one of four History PhDs working in academic administration who shared our professional experiences and thoughts about working on the “alt-ac” track. Three of the four of us are very happy in our career choice.

The subject of PhDs working outside of traditional faculty jobs, “and not feeling bad about it,” has gotten attention recently in the *New York Times*. Why? One reason is Twitter. Twitter drives the news and alt-ac, post-ac, and non-ac jobs are everywhere on Twitter. Indeed, it is the most fertile place for connecting with thought leaders in the alt-academy; the conversation can be followed by searching for hashtag #altac.



The term “alt-ac” encompasses alternative academic employment, as opposed to traditional academic employment or the catch-all “non-academic” employment. To over-simplify, alt-ac jobs are staff positions inside colleges and universities.

The alt-ac conversation has been on the program at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association (@MLAnews) for several years, as academic jobs in the disciplines represented by the MLA have dried up.

The American Historical Association (@AHAhistorians) joined the conversation with the publication of two

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articles by Anthony Grafton and James Grossman: “No More Plan B,” and “Time to Craft a Plan C.” In the latter article, they wrote:

“ Our persistence in supporting certain standards of learning—which is not mere Luddism—is as it should be. Standards matter. But there’s no sense pretending that the new world isn’t out there. Some of the students seeking doctorates in history will join the professoriate, changing the academy, as has each preceding generation. But many other Ph.D.’s will have to blaze new trails, finding ways to remain committed to history, and to practice it, in venues that are not now listed by most departments in their placement claims.

AHA 2013 in New Orleans featured a mini-conference on the Malleable Ph.D., a series of panels about alternative careers for History PhDs. More panels on the subject are slated for AHA 2014, in Washington, DC, with the addition of a career fair, where historians in various lines of work will meet with conference attendees. I will be there – stop by to say hello!

I find my job to be intellectually and personally satisfying, and, I admit it is fun to be part of a movement of troublemakers – challenging the presumed limitations of a specialized advanced degree in the Humanities. But there are practical steps involved in getting from graduate school to here. If you want to expand your career prospects, start thinking about it at the beginning of your graduate program.

Some things to consider:

What is non-negotiable to you?

To me it was firm footing. An academic career, which might eventually have involved tenure and (presumably) job security, at the outset meant potentially uprooting and moving every year, or possibly never laying down roots at all. I left the university for a year and returned to the security of a full-time staff position in a city I have called home off and on for more than twenty years. It’s hard to top that.

What work style suits you?

I am an extrovert and a team player. The isolation of academic work doesn’t suit my personality. At two museum jobs, pre-PhD, I worked in large rooms with five to ten people, and I thrived. A secluded private office at the library, on the other hand, was torture. What work environment suits you? Are you a lone wolf? A team player? Something in between? If you can’t answer this question easily, take advantage of campus resources. You don’t have to invent this process for yourself.

Resources at the University of Texas at Austin:

Liberal Arts Careers Services is expanding career coaching for graduate students, which will include identifying strengths and making a plan to develop skills to complement career goals.

The College of Liberal Arts will debut a menu of summer courses in 2014, including classes about the pedagogy of online education, public scholarship, and writing courses targeted to early stage PhD students and another to ABD dissertators.



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Do you have the network?

If you are considering a career in academic administration, the best thing to do right now is to meet people around campus. Get involved with student government – long the province of undergraduates and professional programs, student government offers opportunities for the small number of Humanities PhD students who get involved. Not only do student leaders advocate for the needs of graduate students, but also they meet with all levels of university administration. There is no substitute for this kind of face time.

There are also opportunities to network online. VersatilePhD.com is an online community that has sprouted meet-up groups in the United States and Canada and lists job opportunities and samples of actual cover letters and resumes that led to alt-ac jobs. The web resources listed below are suitable for current grad students and academics considering a career change.

As this conversation engages the mainstream media along with university administrators, faculty, and potential employers, alt-ac work for Humanities PhDs is coming to be recognized by universities as a successful outcome.

It certainly feels like success to me. Turns out I did not sell myself short back in 2009; I sold the job short.

Lauren Apter Bairnsfather earned a Ph.D. in 2008 and has worked for the College of Liberal Arts at UT Austin since 2009. She tweets [@DrLaurenA](https://twitter.com/DrLaurenA).



For more on the development of “alt-ac,” see Brenda Bethman and C. Shaun Longstreet, “the Alt-Ac Track,” <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/01/14/essay-preparing-academic-or-alt-ac-careers> (January 14, 2013)

Web resources on alt-ac and other careers beyond the professoriate:

fromPhDtolive.com
howtoleaveacademia.com
chroniclevitae.com
VersatilePhD.com (The Graduate School at UT has an institutional subscription)
Specifically for historians: beyondacademe.com

What to follow on Twitter, for starters:

[#altac](https://twitter.com/altac)
[@FromPhDtolive](https://twitter.com/FromPhDtolive)
[@chronicle](https://twitter.com/chronicle)
[@insidehighered](https://twitter.com/insidehighered)
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